

Nuclear Fissure: Britain Balks at Further War

Written by

Wednesday, 15 March 2006 22:15 - Last Updated Wednesday, 15 March 2006 22:15

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AG - Patrick Seale - Britain has told the United States that it will not take part in any armed action against Iran's nuclear sites, according to diplomatic sources in London. Already facing huge public criticism for his participation in the Iraq war, Prime Minister Tony Blair is seeking to distance himself from America's belligerent rhetoric towards Iran.

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Britain Breaks with the U.S. Over Iran

Patrick Seale

Agence Global
March 16, 2006

As the United States continues a steady drumbeat of war-threatening foreign policy towards Iran, Britain begins to move away from its Iraq War partner, joining others in the world community critical of U.S. policy on Iran.

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Blair knows he would probably not survive the political storm if Britain joined in an attack on Iran. The concern in Whitehall, however, is that the Bush administration, egged on by Israel and its powerful friends in the United States, risks developing an unstoppable momentum towards war -- a war in which Britain clearly wants no part.

There is a real fear that if Iran refuses to yield to pressure -- either by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or by the Security Council to which Iran was formally referred on March 8 -- then the United States would be left with no other option than to strike. The United States may indeed have boxed itself into a corner by its threats, which Iran has scornfully rejected.

The view in Whitehall is that if America attacks Iran, it will have to do so alone -- or with Israel. In private discussions, British officials have made clear that any sort of military campaign

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against Iran would be "madness."

In spite of its close alliance with the United States, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has departed publicly from aggressive statements by senior American officials. He has ruled out military action by Britain against Iran as "inconceivable." Last week, Britain announced it was pulling 800 men out of Iraq -- one tenth of its force there. This is seen as a signal that Britain is seeking to limit its involvement in America's wars, rather than take on additional commitments.

Carefully monitoring opinion in Washington, British officials have noted with alarm that the advocates of confrontation with Iran, both inside and outside the Administration, have triumphed over the few brave souls who dared argue in favour of dialogue and engagement.

Analysts in London are now convinced that Washington's real aim is "regime change" in Tehran, an ambition which goes far beyond merely delaying or halting Iran's nuclear programme.

The Washington Post reported this week that Iran had moved to the top of America's national security agenda. Quite apart from the large teams devoted to the Iran problem in the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies, ten people are now working full time on the Iran desk at the State Department, while an American outpost of Tehran-watchers has been established in Dubai.

Earlier this month U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared: "We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran whose policies are directed at developing a Middle East that would be 180 degrees different from the Middle East that we would like to see develop." In a bid to undermine the Mullahs, she is planning to spend \$85m expanding American radio and TV broadcasts to Iran and promote internal opposition.

In a widely reported speech on March 7 to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the main pro-Israeli lobby, Vice-President Dick Cheney declared: "The United States is keeping all options on the table in addressing the irresponsible conduct of the [Iranian] regime. We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon."

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On the same day, General Moshe Ya'alon, a former Israeli chief of staff, told a Washington audience that Israel could launch an attack on Iran in several different ways, not just from the air. This was seen as a reference to Israel's Dolphin class submarines, armed with American Harpoon nuclear missiles, which are thought to be targeted on Iran.

As with the invasion of Iraq, the campaign against Iran seems to be driven by neocons and other pro-Israeli activists. Richard Perle -- one of the most eager advocates of the Iraq war -- has been beating the drums of war against Iran, as has the pro-Israeli Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Even Ze'ev Schiff, a usually sober Israeli defence analyst, wrote last week in Haaretz that intelligence services in the West were convinced that Iran was covertly developing nuclear weapons. "There is a secondary, smaller covert channel that is making steady progress towards creating a nuclear weapon," he claimed.

The Israeli daily Haaretz reported on March 10 that "in recent months, IDF officers have visited Washington to offer their support for a military strike should the diplomatic channels fail to bring Iran to heel."

American war fever against Iran seems largely to do with Israel. It includes Iran's support for anti-Israeli militant groups such as Hizballah and Hamas, as well as President Ahmadinejad's remarks about "wiping Israel off the map," which most independent observers dismiss as an angry response to Israel's brutal oppression of the Palestinians, and not in any sense a realistic threat.

President George W. Bush and his Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have accused Iran of smuggling sophisticated road-side bombs and military personnel into Iraq, but General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admitted this week that the United States had no proof of such activity.

In claiming that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, the United States seems in danger of repeating the mistake it made in Iraq. The evidence against Iran is as flimsy and as unproven as was the charge that Iraq's WMD posed an "imminent threat" to America and the world. There is no sign, however, that Washington is ready to heed the advice of IAEA chief Muhammad ElBaradei, who urged the United States to end the "war of words" with Tehran and "engage in a dialogue."

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Russia, too, is anxious to avert the danger of war -- not least to protect its substantial interests in Iran. Russia is supplying Iran with an advanced air defence system and has almost finished building Iran's first nuclear power station at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf at a reported cost of \$800m. Moscow is keen to win more nuclear power contracts in Iran where Energy Minister Parviz Fattah this week announced plans to start building a second nuclear power station within six months.

Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, described Iran's referral to the Security Council as "too hasty." "This move is detrimental," he said on Russian state TV. "Not one real problem can be decided with such a move?. We don't want to be the ones to remind [everyone] who was right and who was not in Iraq, although the answer is obvious."

A Russian compromise proposal to produce nuclear fuel for Iranian power stations in Russia, while allowing Iran to enrich a small amount of uranium on its own soil, was shot down by the US. "Enrichment and reprocessing on Iranian soil is not acceptable," Condoleezza Rice said.

In confronting Iran, the United States may not have fully weighed the possible consequences: the extreme danger to U.S. forces in Iraq; soaring oil prices; and, encouragement for the world-wide jihadi movement, which is bound to result in terror attacks against U.S. and Israeli interests.

It looks as if the United States has no coherent policy towards Iran -- only bluster.

Iran has an "inalienable right" under the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty to acquire atomic knowledge for peaceful purposes. It has the ability to hit back hard against any aggressor. And, even were it to acquire nuclear weapons -- a remote possibility several years in the future -- it could surely be contained and deterred by the immensely greater nuclear arsenals of the United States and Israel.

The inescapable conclusion would seem to be that the United States should start direct talks with Iran as soon as possible. It may be the only way to defuse the threat of war, to provide the United States with an exit strategy from Iraq, and to build bridges to an inflamed Muslim public opinion.

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Patrick Seale is a leading British writer on the Middle East, and the author of *The Struggle for Syria*; also, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*; and *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*.

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Released: 16 March 2006

Word Count: 1,298

Advisory Release: 16 March 2006

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